

Food for Thought: The Analysis of Consumption, Preparation, and Placement of Food in Media

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Imagine our world without food.

While most of us can't even imagine an afternoon without food, food items in literature, movies, and other artworks have tended to fall out of view: characters, if they are surviving, *must* be eating, though if that eating mostly happens off the page, the details are left to our imagination. Even when we do see mealtime during a scene or hear about “amber waves of grain” in a song, analyses often step around food as a symbol, as an arbiter, or as a marker of real and imagined differences. Our cultural distaste with discussions of food (compared to the body that consumes it) has made food studies, as a formal discipline, only emerge in the last few decades, with rigorous cultural food studies even newer. Considering our personal and global biases surrounding food, this begs the questions: how many wars have been fought and colonies established over access to water and agricultural sources? How many people have been relegated to the kitchen or the dining room based on their sex, race, and/or class? Food forms the backbone of most religious and spiritual understandings, too: think of the forbidden fruit's function in Abrahamic traditions or the role of the mustard seed in Buddhist teachings about death.

Perhaps this religiosity of food was what led Thomas C. Foster, while professor of English at University of Michigan-Flint, to declare that “whenever people eat or drink together, it's communion” (8). He clarifies, though, that “not all communions are holy”; rather, mealtime is a process between people that develops—even necessitates—cultural and social undertones: “breaking bread together is an act of sharing and peace, since if you're breaking bread you're not breaking heads” (8). Food, according to this view, is the ultimate form of subtext; it can act as the canvas on which almost any scene to play out, only catching us unaware when its function becomes disrupted.

Yet food—in art as well as life—tends to go beyond its daily role to become the disruptor itself. *The Digital Literature Review*, Ball State's undergraduate academic literary journal, has taken up cultural food studies as its focus this year to highlight how our meals can be both normative and subversive, particularly when put in conversation with issues facing marginalized communities. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has arguably made the job of introducing this aspect of cultural food studies easier: who hasn't been moved, since the beginning of lockdown, to try a sourdough recipe or to watch a program like *The Great British Bake Off*? At the same time, the continued food shortages coupled with the

resulting waves of malnutrition; the re-imposition of culinary domesticity on working mothers; and the precarious financial situation for small businesses (including small groceries), particularly in minority-majority areas, spell out the dynamic and sometimes uneasy relationship we all have been maintaining with food.

With this wider acknowledgment of food as a worthy aspect of cultural studies, we are also inclined to recognize subtle yet distinct differences in the analysis of food through multiple types of media. Specifically, literature, film, and television all use food distinctly and require a different lens of analysis. Literature is a more intentional form of media. References to specific foods or particular food-related moments almost guarantee an intention behind them worthy of inspection. Film is quite similar, but different in that it is a visual medium. Intention can thus be portrayed in a variety of ways, namely in the presentation of food itself along with the way the actors portray the actual consumption. Television offers a truly unique lens for analysis with weekly episodes, and repetition becomes a much more powerful tool for analysis. Additionally, television allows for analysis of cooking and food in a more direct sense with such a wide array of cooking and baking shows and their own intentional portrayals of food spaces.

Throughout the fall semester of our *Digital Literature Review* class, we explored food studies through texts by authors of varied backgrounds. Kiese Laymon's *Heavy: An American Memoir* (2018) is about Laymon's complex relationship with food and his mother wanting him to be successful. In regards to Laymon's complex relationship with food, it is both a comfort and a contributing cause to his discomfort. Throughout the memoir, Laymon struggles with body issues arising from his mother's teasing amongst others' barbs. His primary way of overcoming discomfort is gorging himself with food, in particular unhealthy junk food or whatever is within his reach. However, this unhealthy coping mechanism simply exacerbates his body issues. A particularly unique aspect of this memoir is that it focuses on body issues from the male perspective, a perspective not usually seen in media because it contrasts with the stereotypes associated both with men and women. Continuing on with our study, Monique Truong's novel *Bitter in the Mouth* (2011) tells the story of food identity through the character of Linda Hammerick, a Vietnamese-American girl who has been adopted. The relationship of food is explored through Linda's struggles that arise, in part, from growing up in a conservative, predominantly white town in North Carolina. Particularly important is Linda's lexical-gustatory synesthesia, which has an effect on how she interacts with the world, which could be positive or negative depending on the taste of a word. Lastly, Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* (1981) focuses on the symbolism that foods have in different cultures—in this instance, an island in the Caribbean—and among people with different socio-economic backgrounds. The wealthy white Street family employs several Black servants and has little understanding of the entitlement underwriting their food requests, such as imported apples for a Christmas dinner. Though primarily we learned about food studies via literature, the film works of director Bong Joon-Ho were influential as well.

Bong Joon-ho shows intersections of food studies with ideas of class and social structure in many ways throughout his filmography. His film *Snowpiercer* (2013) shows the separation of class and the way it impacts food security in a very literal sense; in the film, people of different classes are separated into train cars, and these class separations impact not only how they are treated but how they live and what

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food they have access to as well. This becomes clearer as the small band of rebels, inhabitants of the last and societally lowest-ranked train car that the film follows, works their way up through the train cars towards the front, seeing just how differently they were forced to live from those of higher classes living towards the front of the train. This, in the most literal sense, is a signifier of class division and social separation through the lens of food theory and food studies—while the back of the train eats what can be most accurately described as protein blocks, people of higher societal class toward the front of the train live in luxury and eat gourmet meals to their heart's content.

This is not the only Bong Joon-ho's film wherein food as a signifier of class division plays a prominent role. Bong's film *Parasite* (2019) provides another clear indication of the impact that class and its separation can have on a psyche, especially through a food studies lens. The Kim family, the main characters of the film, are first seen in a basement apartment, cramped into a small space and stealing free Wi-Fi from a nearby cafe. They have only a few small rooms, they sleep on the floor, and the food that we see this family eat is cheap and easy while significantly lacking in nutritional contents—plain bread, prepackaged food, and canned beverages that look as if they come from a vending machine. Once they begin receiving employment from the wealthy Park family, we see the stark difference in the access that this wealthier family has to food—a fully stocked refrigerator, fresh fruit, and an elaborately catered garden party held for a child's birthday. There is also a stark difference drawn through the food that the Kim family can afford after being employed by the Parks—in the beginning of the film, the entire family works folding pizza boxes, but after the two children become employed by the Parks, the Kim family is able to afford eating at the very pizza place where they used to work. These visual examples of leisure and security in food as compared with the struggle faced by the Kims in obtaining food in the beginning of the film show clear class divides and social disparities through a lens of food studies. Both of *Parasite* and *Snowpiercer* show distinct signifiers of the ways in which food studies interplay with the images and concepts of class and wealth inequality in film.

The study of food as a lens exists not only in literature and film but also in television, which we discussed and analyzed within our class in regard to shows ranging from Gordon Ramsey's *Hell's Kitchen* to Rachel Ray's *30 Minute Meals* to Padma Lakshmi's *Taste the Nation*. In "Domestic Divo?: Televised Treatments of Masculinity, Femininity, and Food," Rebecca Swenson explains how food television depicts men "construct[ing] cooking as a way to flex professional muscles, a theme which rejects situating the male cook as an everyday provider of the personal, domestic care that is a hallmark of family life," whereas women are presented "with instructional programs position themselves as approachable, domestic cooks that prepare meals for friends and family members" (143). Swenson applies food studies within these television shows to the theoretical framework of gender as exercised within media to point out that, while both men and women have public platforms within the sphere of food and the kitchen, they are still existing in the separate spheres of public and domestic domains. These gender scripts are evident in their differences in mannerisms (men are often yelling, displaying themselves as more "macho," while women are often more docile and family friendly), choice of fashion (within these cooking shows men are often wearing their chef's outfits, whereas women are dressed more casually like a normal day at home), and the style and format of the show as determined by the television broadcaster.

Food, while historically known for playing a strong role in defining genders in television as

Swenson notes, can also be approached in a more gender-neutral fashion in television through shows such as *Taste the Nation* on Hulu. This series showcases food and the cultures from which they are derived, and is hosted by Padma Lakshmi, who connects with the people of the culture, such as how women tend to do within food in television, while also being adventurous and eating foods outside of comfort zones, such as men are typically presented doing. This merges the separate spheres into one, illustrating the intersectionality of food as a lens within media such as television.

One way that we chose to exemplify these intersections of food with larger social issues is through the inclusion of recipes from each of our staff members. We have interspersed recipes throughout this journal's powerful essays, ranging from espresso brownies to delicious cocktails. With these, we set out to tell a story, following a day's meals and linking them thematically to the essays in our journal.

With this inclusion, the larger importance of recipes in food studies is hopefully brought to light. Recipes hold a key role in the full understanding of food studies; in many ways, recipes operate as time capsules, fully capturing a culture's way of life and its relationship to food at any specific time—we think of certain meals, and they conjure different feelings for different people. The treatment of recipes as a valuable source of understanding allows for a more thorough understanding of life from varying perspectives. This is best explored by Katharina Vester's "Queering the Cookbook" when she states, "Cookbooks have a long tradition of giving instructions that are not solely meant to produce roasts, cupcakes, or beer. The recipes as well as the narrative they are embedded in carry ideological content that reaches far beyond the realm of the kitchen" (131). Vester's words frame our own ideology regarding the recipes we've included. These short glimpses into the journal's identity allow us to look more introspectively at our own consumption and how these recipes may impact our views and the way through which we interpret these essays.

We begin this issue of the *Digital Literature Review* with Emily Turner's essay, "The Parasite of Society: Food and Class Studies in Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite*," which dives into food studies within the cinematic world of Bong's work, a defining aspect of this year's journal. In her essay, she discusses how Bong utilizes food in *Parasite* to denote class inequality that is a direct consequence of the power and wealth divide between the rich and the poor, signaling to the eventual collapse of society. From film to novels, we cross over to Hannah Salih's essay, "Meat Consumption, Abject Bodies, and Toxic Flows in Ruth Ozeki's *My Year of Meats*" in which she analyzes meat production and consumption within *My Year of Meats* to discuss othering oneself through abjection in relation to both toxicity and cleanliness. Through the framework of abjection, Salih compares violence towards women and animals in the novel to form the idea that bodies can "transgress normative boundaries" through bodily functions.

Violence within the meat industry transforms to violence within human nature through the gaze of food and othering in Nimisha Sinha's essay, "'I see what I have been dreading': Witnessing Food and Violence in *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *In the Heart of the Country*." Food in these novels act as modes of violence, which Sinha theorizes through the lens of "food witnessing." Here, she argues that food witnessing can represent the urge to consume, or eliminate, the "Others," mimicking a cannibalistic desire. Violence through means of consumption is further discussed in Kaila Henkin's essay, "Redirecting the Blame: America's Overconsumption of Black Women as Illustrated in Kiese Laymon's *Heavy*." Henkin uses the theoretical framework of triple consciousness, coined after W.E.B. Du Bois's double

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consciousness theory, to analyze how women in Kiese Laymon's *Heavy: An American Memoir* are consumed by dominant, white male power as a result of overindulgence without consequence due to societal-caused trauma.

We now transition to more feminist and food theory ideologies with Dilayda Tülübaş's essay, "Women Dined Well: Bakhtinian Carnavalesque in Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*." In this play, historical female characters socialize over a shared meal, which Tülübaş studies through the theoretical context of the carnivalesque. Food in this essay, then, acts as a way to analyze each woman to show how she is dominated in a patriarchal world—a form of oppression that transcends different time periods as well as locations.

Our journal thus leans into the next essay relating to Bong's films: "Eat the Rich: The Parasitic Relationship Between Socioeconomic Groups as explored through film by Bong Joon-Ho's *Parasite* and *Snowpiercer*" by Vincent Ramos-Niaves. In his essay, Ramos-Niaves analyzes how the placement of food in the films *Parasite* and *Snowpiercer* represents class inequality. Methods of consumption as well as food location shows how the elite dominate the impoverished through abuse and punishment. Julia Neugarten furthers the discussion of food in spaces in her essay, "The Whistle Stop Café and Luke's Diner: The Village Café as Utopian Space for Women in *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café* and *Gilmore Girls*." In this piece, Neugarten explores the concept of utopian spaces for women in cafés within two different media. Female characters seek refuge in their respective cafés, where they can fight against gender norms through both action and speech. Neugarten also ties in queer theory within these spaces due to the same-sex relationship found within *Fried Green Tomatoes*, which leads us to the penultimate essay of our journal issue.

Allen Warren argues in his essay, "Life's a Peach: The Convergence of Sexuality and Class in Guadagnino's *Call Me by Your Name*," that food is used in Guadagnino's award-winning film to cultivate the same-sex relationship between the two main characters, Elio and Oliver. Warren approaches his thesis with a socioeconomic framework to explore how food propels and sustains the budding relationship, both sexual and romantic, between the two lovers despite the class division that works to separate them. The film ends with the cruel reality of unrequited love, which transitions well to the final essay of this journal. The 2021 edition of the *Digital Literature Review* concludes with the third and final essay that discusses Bong's work: Tauri Hagemann's essay, "Food for the Dogs: Consumption and Wealth Inequality in Bong Joon-Ho's *Parasite*." Hagemann utilizes socioeconomic theory to analyze the role of food in the film *Parasite*. She posits that food in the film represents class divide through modes of poverty as exemplified in various scenes, which begs the ultimate question: *who is the true parasite within a capitalist society?*

The order of this year's journal encourages the reader to experience the different aspects of food in the media through each author's frame of thought and argument. Each essay, although varying in subject, proves the significance of food in books, movies, plays, and more as food in these works represents the different facets of life. So, grab a cup of steaming coffee, a slice of pineapple chicken pizza, or perhaps a piece of chocolate toast to pair with the consumption of this year's journey. Eat every bite, leave no leftovers, and discover what lies beyond each platter.

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